

Guatemala: Rebuilding a Country in the Aftermath of Violence

Research Thesis

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ABSTRACT

From the 1960s to 1996, Guatemala endured a violent civil war. After an indigenous group of Mayans decided to overthrow the elites that had been ruling Guatemala for over a century, the government worked with the Guatemalan military to exaggerate the threat against the country and start a brutal protest against all indigenous Guatemalans that lasted 40 years. Over these 40 years, the army forced indigenous Guatemalans to kill each other in order to save their families, murdered over 200,000 Guatemalans, and displaced another 1.5 million Guatemalans.

The Guatemalan government and the indigenous Guatemalans signed a peace agreement in 1996, but true resolution still has not been reached in Guatemala. Even though scholars have studied and deemed the conflict both a civil war and genocide due to the atrocities inflicted by the Guatemalan government and army, the perpetrators of the war have not been brought to justice.

This research project seeks to assess the collective memory of this violence, or how indigenous Guatemalans narrate what happened. In order to study collective memories in Guatemala today, I spent 6 weeks in the Guatemalan highlands. During this time, I engaged in numerous informal conversations as well as 9 in-depth interviews with indigenous Guatemalans. I also analyzed how individuals' experiences in and exposure to the war shape their thoughts about their country and the war in the aftermath of the conflict. I found that collective memories helped individuals learn about why the war occurred and kept Guatemalans fighting for social justice within their country by having something to believe in.

INTRODUCTION

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala experienced a civil war that was centered around policy differences, discrimination, communism, and land owning rights. During these 36 years, the Guatemalan army and the rebel guerrilla fighters fought against each in other in order to gain power of the government and the country so that they could govern the country how they saw fit. In 1996, the two groups signed a peace accord, and the Guatemalan government kept control of the country after making changes to the Guatemalan constitution and changing how the indigenous Mayan were going to be treated. The guerrilla fighters did not walk away empty handed. The rebel army won the right for Mayans to practice their culture and learn about their roots after 500 years of colonization kept them from learning about their forefathers and traditions.

I spent six weeks in Guatemala with a group called Operation Groundswell learning about this civil war and interviewing 9 individuals, many of whom were guerrilla fighters during the war, about their experiences during and after the war. My aim was to understand how they viewed such a pivotal part of Guatemala's history and the impact that it had on their life after the peace accords were signed. Through the lenses of cultural trauma and collective memory, interviews revealed that preserving the memory of the war, why it happened, and what should be done in order to ensure that it does not happen again are the primary goals for those that were involved in the conflict. Community, creativity, and education are the pillars on which communities in Guatemala are building the country's future, and they are determined to help their country develop so they can continue to heal from the scars that the war left on them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The events that took place in Guatemala between 1960 and 1996 changed the country as a whole and impacted all Guatemalans in some way. The government destroyed communities and tore families apart as they ravaged through towns and kidnapped and killed individuals without looking back. The effects that this 36-year war had on Guatemala are shaping how people live their lives and contribute to developing their country.

Widespread episodes of mass violence like the events that took in Guatemala often become what sociologists call "cultural traumas." My research illustrates that Guatemalans have experienced a cultural trauma and are creating collective memories in order to educate Guatemalans and the world about what happened and why it can never happen again. Cultural trauma can be defined as trauma that is experienced by an entire culture when they experience a horrific event that affects and changes aspects of an entire culture. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al (2004) explained that any culture can have a disruption, in which a belief or way of living is

changed; however, in order to have a cultural trauma, social crises must become cultural crises. Specifically, “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander et al, 2004, pg. 1). When a society experiences cultural trauma, there is great damage that is done to that group’s belief systems as well as their trust in others and institutions. There is also a search for a story that can be shared with others in order to explain the trauma that they experienced.

A cultural trauma is a specific form of a broader phenomenon called a collective memory. Halbwachs (1992) coined this term and describes it as a story or explanation of an event that a society or group shares and that individuals within the group remember and relay to others. This does not mean that an entire group has the exact same memory. Instead, collective memory is present when the cause and effect of a memory is the same among the group that experienced the event. According to Chirwa (1997, pg. 482), “The memory becomes collective when it goes beyond an individual account, subscribed to and shared by a group.” Chirwa stresses that the memories must retain both emotional and historical relevance and that they become collective memory when the memories spark shared emotions among a group. “It is for this reason that collective memory becomes part of the process of healing, reconciliation, and reconstruction at both the individual and communal levels” (Chirwa, 1997, pg. 482).

People can mobilize collective memory to help a society begin the healing and reconciliation process after a traumatic event. If a cultural trauma occurs, collective memory can help bring members of the community together and can help start the healing process for them by facilitating the recounting of memories and changing the way they think and feel about the

events that they have experienced. Indeed, when a group experiences cultural trauma, they experience intense suffering and change in their lives. Alexander et al (2004) discussed how a society can come to understand what happened and what role they played in the event when they dive into constructing a cultural trauma and begin to try to understand what happened and why it happened. This acceptance of responsibility can help a society tremendously because once a group can understand that they played a part in the trauma, whatever side it was for or however big the role was, they can start to work through memories of the events and start to construct a collective memory with peers that will explain what happened and how it impacted their society.

Creating a collective memory of a cultural trauma is not an easy task, however. It involves first breaking down the trauma and its effects on a group and then discovering how to best represent everyone's memories in the collective memory. Hom et al (1999) explains that this is an active process of creating a memory and requires a construction of the past, not just recalling memories of the past. As they explain, "...memory is 'collective,' because it emerges from interaction among people, institutions, media, and other cultural forms. It involves 'construction' because those collective memories are not found, but rather are built and continually altered" (Hom et al, 1999, pg. 1764). Different groups of people might create different collective memories depending on what their collective experience is. Additionally, some people have more power to create collective memories and may feel more compelled to create a collective memory with a group than others.

Collective memories can also enhance social integration. Rime et al (1998) conducted a study in which they analyze the effects of sharing memories on people's ability to reconcile with a trauma. This study examines the idea that everyday emotion and emotions that stem from trauma are the same base emotions, just in different contexts and amounts. After analyzing the

effects of sharing memories in groups, Rime et al concludes that if groups share memories more after a trauma, their emotional side effects from the trauma may be more manageable. As they explain, “Sharing emotions diminishes the intensity of the emotional upset elicited by the emotional memory, and thus contributes to emotional recovery or relief” (Rime et al, 1998, pg. 170). Rime et al help illustrate the benefits of creating a collective memory, as groups that partake in social sharing have enhanced social integration and often find a restored self-esteem and self-concept because of the creation of a collective memory. Even though the benefits of collective memory are obvious, there are limits to collective memory and its reach. Chirwa (1997) points out, “While it is not meant to be used for an entire country to come to terms with a trauma, a collective memory can be extremely helpful for local communities that need to deal with their past and work towards the declaration – never again!” (pg. 482).

While many people have studied cultural trauma and collective memory, only a few people have studied them in Guatemala. Many people that study Guatemala examine the war and the atrocities that were committed during it. Others look at what steps were being taken by the government and outside sources in order to bring justice to the country. For example, the researchers Allier and Crenzel (2015) examine the social injustices that led to the war in Guatemala, the struggle of the indigenous Mayans, and the social change that the Mayans in Guatemala were fighting for during the war. They examine Guatemala along with a handful of other Latin American countries that have had similar internal conflicts as Guatemala. They also offer insight to both the perspective of the indigenous Mayans and the military and search for answers as to why a movement to recognize Mayan rights escalated into a 36-year war that consisted of such violent crimes against humans. Cleary and Steigenga (2004) examine how the church has had a part in establishing justice for countries in Latin America that have gone

through tragedy. They discuss how even though Guatemala is one of the countries with the most indigenous people, there is a growing desire for Protestant churches in the country. They also discuss how the Catholic Church helped represent the indigenous people when peace accords were being established in Guatemala after the war ended.

Other studies analyze the effects that rituals of social sharing and religious rituals can have on individuals coping with their trauma. For example, Beristain et al (2000) discusses how rituals and social sharing can help individuals who have gone through cultural trauma as a result of the Guatemalan war. This social sharing is described as collective memory, and Beristain et al examines how survivors of the Guatemalan genocide could benefit from using collective memory to bond with others on the experiences that they went through and heal from the tragedy they endured. Their results confirm that social sharing and utilizing collective memory along with rituals as a way of healing after an event like the Guatemalan civil war and genocide can help a group begin to heal and make sense out of the memories they have. Another study by Gasparre et al (2014) also examines the effects of social sharing and participating in rituals to help individuals cope with the experiences they have lived through during the Guatemalan war. Gasparre et al randomly assigned fifty-nine genocide survivors to different groups that stressed different social sharing methods. This study concluded that participating in social sharing and rituals, whether for religious or sharing purposes, promoted altruistic behavior and helped individuals cope better on their own and in groups.

While many studies, like the ones seen above, examine collective memory, social sharing, and/or facts about the Guatemalan war, few studies examine how cultural trauma and collective memory play a part in the everyday lives of Guatemalans, and how cultural trauma and collective memory play a role in the formation of communities and social justice through

economic change. Neither Allier & Crenzel nor Cleary & Steigenga discuss Guatemala today and how Guatemalans are working to develop their country, and using collective memory to educate each other on the war and why Mayans were fighting in the first place. Beristain et al and Gasparre et al both examine social sharing and collective memory in Guatemala but neither of them look at how Guatemalans are using social sharing and collective memory to continue to fight against injustices in Guatemala. In these ways, my research is different and important.

Through interviews with indigenous Guatemalans, I examine how going through cultural trauma and creating a collective memory can motivate a society to continue to fight for justice by forming supportive communities and making economic change in the country of Guatemala. My research takes a more personal perspective on post-war Guatemala and how long-term violence affects people and how they live their lives after the war.

In what follows, I will be showing how the cultural trauma of the Guatemalan War and the collective memory that groups of guerrilla fighters have of the war have shaped how these individuals live today and how they are educating others for the future. The cultural trauma that they experienced in the war was deathly and left them without loved ones, a job or a home, and without trust for their own government and many other governments. Even though the trauma for many Guatemalans was great, they continue to tell their stories so people understand how terrible a 36-year war was, and how survival instincts and educating each other about why they were fighting kept their morale high and their belief in the guerrilla fighters strong. These Guatemalans are now educating others so that they ensure that the children of today will grow up to understand their past and can help keep history from repeating itself.

THE CASE OF GUATEMALA

Since colonial time, Latin American history as a whole has been marked by brutal discrimination and repression by European powers against indigenous peoples. Independence from colonial Spain in 1821 did not bring any relief to the repression felt by indigenous Mayan populations in Guatemala. A series of authoritarian regimes created and maintained by the elite *ladino*¹ class dominated the country for over a century. These regimes were based on protecting the economic interest of the wealthy, non-indigenous minority which reified racist precepts and practices against the impoverished Mayan majority (Marín Beristain et al, 2000). After centuries of oppression, the Mayan people began to mobilize and protest their treatment, beginning a civil war in the country in 1960.

In the late 1970s, a small insurgent group made up of poor working class Mayans formed and intended to overthrow the government by force in order to construct a new social, political, and economic system based on Marxist doctrine. Although the Guatemalan government was aware that the group was never powerful enough to pose a real threat, the government intentionally exaggerated the threat and labeled the groups—and by extension all Mayans—“internal Communist enemies” (CEH 1999). With Cold War tensions heightening internationally, the United States supported the Guatemalan government by providing supplies and counterinsurgency training to the Guatemalan army. Privately, the US government had a vested interest in oppressing any political change in the region as the current authoritarian regimes protected US economic interest.

With the support of the United States, the Guatemalan government waged a scorched earth policy against indigenous Mayan communities, predominantly in the Western highland region of the country. During this time, the Guatemalan army infiltrated the local Mayan

¹ *Ladino* refers to non-indigenous Guatemalans, *mestizos* (mixed race), and westernized Mayans. The *ladinos* comprise a minority of the Guatemalan population but hold much of the wealth and power.

communities and forced men of all ages to form Civil Patrols (PAC) to fight the rebel groups. Members of the PAC were often told by the Guatemalan soldiers that they and their families would be murdered if they did not join the patrol group (Menchu 1984, Montejo 1987). This state-orchestrated violence destroyed over 600 Mayan communities and left survivors traumatized. Over the course of five years from 1978 to 1983, the state killed over 200,000 people and displaced an estimated 1.5 million others (Marín Beristain et al, 2000). While the violent campaign ended in 1983, the Guatemalan Civil War persisted until 1996, when the rebel groups and the Guatemalan government signed a peace agreement.

As a part of the peace agreements, the United Nations was ordered to support a Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) meant to determine if any human rights abuses occurred during the Guatemalan Civil War. After two years of investigation, the CEH produced a report clearly demonstrating that genocide occurred against the indigenous Mayan population. As stipulated by the Guatemalan government, however, the report did not include any names of individuals or groups responsible for the genocide. Because of the nature of the report and the ineffective corrupt justice system, there has been total impunity for perpetrators of the genocide (Arriaza and Roht-Arriaza 2010).

After a civil war that lasted for 36 years and ended in 1996, Guatemala is still trying to get back on its feet. Because of the lack of recognition for this war and the violent acts committed by the government from 1978-1983, the perpetrators of the crimes that occurred were never brought to justice, and continue to have psychological holds on communities throughout Guatemala. In recent years, Guatemalans have started to get back on their feet by redefining their fight for justice. Instead of demanding change and justice through violence, many communities in Guatemala are now fighting for change through economic and developmental projects.

As there have not been any government reform programs for Guatemalans to transition out of this genocide, the change throughout Guatemala and the determination to rebuild the country to be stronger than it was before represents a remarkable shift that needs to be further examined. A look at how communities in Guatemala are focusing on economic changes and internal development can lead to a better understanding of the importance of a country's mindset, and how collective goals assist in the fight to regain control and trust in the aftermath of a national tragedy, like the Guatemalan civil war and genocide. While there has been research on the tragedies that occurred during the violence and the aftermath of the violence, research on Guatemalans' ideas of justice and development in the years after the violence is narrow. This research is important to see how Guatemala is developing after the violence and healing from the years of harm that the government put the Mayan communities through. My findings focus on how the collective memory of those that were involved in the war have helped build up individuals and communities after the war. By remembering what happened and educating others with memories of those who were directly involved, the country as a whole can start to heal and move forward with their new way of living and focus on solving new struggles of today instead of staying stuck on the injustices of the past.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

I conducted 9 interviews with survivors of the Guatemalan civil war and genocide. I define survivors as people whose lives were targeted and/or at risk during the genocide due to their perceived ethnicity or relationships with the targeted group. These interviews are with ex-guerrilla fighters, indigenous Guatemalan community members, and social co-op employees and directors. Interviews can shed light on collective memories, as collections of stories can present similar themes, allowing researchers to see how "recurrent experiences and recurrent

interpretations of those experiences” emerge (Prins et al, 2013, pg. 84). This is particularly important in the context of Guatemala, where stories are the main source of remembrance for the genocide.

I chose to interview respondents through snowball sampling. The program that I traveled through Guatemala with was called Operation Groundswell and consisted of 12 participants and 2 group leaders. The program was focused on social change and development so all of the individuals that we spoke with as a group were also my interviewees. Since our group’s focus was learning about the history of Guatemala, everyone that I spoke with and heard from was found through Operation Groundswell. Operation Groundswell found these individuals by going to different towns throughout the country offering support and volunteers for community projects in exchange for lectures and homestays for students that are interested in immersing themselves in different cultures (Operation Groundswell). For example, one community that we stayed at for four days is a community of ex-guerilla fighters who are also fair trade coffee farmers. Operation Groundswell leaders connected with the community’s leaders and were able to get five different houses in the community that were willing to host students and spend time sharing their stories with all of us. For one of my interviews, one of the female leaders in the community asked other women in the community to come and share their experiences. Because of the influence that the leader had in the community, our group was able to hear stories from five different women instead of just one.

Turning to these individuals, 7 of the people I interviewed were women and 2 were men, with their ages spanning from early forties to late seventies (and average ages in the sixties). The reason that so many interviewees were women is because the woman who organized one of the talks for our group asked many female community members to be a part of the lecture. Unlike

these women's husbands, who worked in the coffee fields in the afternoons, many women were able to give up some of their afternoon cooking time in order to speak with us. Both men that I interviewed were interviewed twice because of the content that they had to share. One of the men gave a narrative of his life to our entire group and then after he spoke with all of us, I was able to interview him separately and ask him specific questions that I wanted answered for my research. The other man I interviewed gave a narrative to our group two different times, once about his life and how he got involved with the guerrilla fighters and another time about racism and discrimination in Guatemala. Each of these talks were just under two hours long so they were scheduled for different days for the sake of time.

One of the men owned a business that was a restaurant and hangout for Guatemalans in the city of Xela and was an ex-guerrilla fighter who fought in the war for five years. The other man I interviewed was a coffee farmer and community leader, and was a part of the guerrilla fighters for 28 years. Two of the women I interviewed were partners in weaving cooperatives and served as the middlemen in communications between indigenous Mayan women and businesses that wanted the women's weaving designs. The other five women I interviewed were community members and coffee farmers in the same coffee farming community of ex-guerrillas of the man I interviewed. Four of the five women I interviewed in this community were ex-guerrilla fighters. One of the women was also a leader of another social change organization that fights for women's rights and strives to stop femicides in Guatemala.

I conducted interviews between May and July of 2017. I thus analyzed collective memory as an outcome of a process rather than the process of memory construction itself, as I do not document collective memories over time. I conducted each interview in the language chosen by the respondent. If the participant preferred Spanish, my group's leaders helped to translate the

participant's responses. I have a minor in Spanish so I do have a level of proficiency in the language; however, I also relied on my group leaders in order to help with the translations and fully understand the meaning of the Guatemalan terminology that my interviewees utilized. If the participant preferred English, no translation was required.

I used a semi-structured interview technique that allowed for standardized questions and flexibility in answers. All but one of my interviews took place with the rest of my program group present, so there is a chance that the group could have influenced what content we heard and what the individual was willing to share. It is possible that the individual was less willing to open up about specific experiences and more emotional times that they experienced because they did not want to disclose that information to a group of fourteen people. It is also possible that the interviewee could have emphasized some details or lessened the harshness of some details based on the group's reaction to certain things. For example, if the group seemed tired or shocked by an event, an interviewee may not have expanded on an experience in order to please the group.

Since I was with a group, most participants told their narrative and there was time for questions afterward. In general, the prompt for the participant was, "What was your experience with the war?" The individual was then given the opportunity to tell their narrative and questions were generally held until the end of their narrative. Oftentimes, allowing someone to tell their narrative is useful when researching collective memory because this allows the individual to tell their story as they remember it, without interruptions and prompts to talk about specific instances. The questions asked after the narrative were focused on obtaining information that the individual did not talk about in their narrative and were generally like, "What was your childhood like? What did you do after the war ended?" Interviews typically did not follow a temporal order but rather included loosely organized questions. These questions often led to

narratives of their lives, and many respondents discussed perceived causes of the violence within these narratives. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 3 hours, with the majority lasting over an hour.

Interviews were almost always conducted in respondent homes or in a place in which they were comfortable, like a community garden or cafe. Given the sensitive nature of memory in post-conflict settings in general (e.g., Goodhand 2000), I assured respondents that their answers would be confidential and did not retain information with personal identifiers. Respondents were free to stop the interview any time and were not probed if they were noticeably in distress.

It is also important to note that I spent much time with interviewees, often eating together, participating in service projects with them as my guide, and talking for several hours before beginning interviews. This was part of the process of developing rapport with the participants and gaining insight into their daily lives. Accordingly, a number of respondents opened up to me about the family they lost during the war and the struggles they dealt with after the war ended. These instances suggest that I developed a level of trust with many respondents. All interviews were transcribed and themes were assigned throughout each interview to be able to recognize themes across all of the interviews.

FINDINGS

Through my interviews with nine Guatemalans, I discovered that there were three main themes that all of my interviewees talked about: 1) sharing memories with one another led to communities being formed, 2) communities often sparked the desire for social and economic change, and the 3) importance of education about the discrimination in Guatemala's past. As people shared memories with one another, they realized that they trusted one another and

believed in similar things as one another, so it was beneficial to form a community altogether. Once this community was formed, social and economic initiatives were started because of the like-mindedness that was present in the communities that were made of up ex-guerrilla fighters, families of ex-guerrillas, and rebel army allies. As these groups and communities continue to fight for social and economic justice in Guatemala today, they think it is very important to educate the younger generations and other community members about Mayan history, the causes of the war, and what justice is still being fought for today.

Memories of the War

In this section, I will discuss the factors interviewees believed were responsible for the war and then describe the details of the memories that the individuals I interviewed shared with me. The memories of the 9 individuals are full of hurt, loss, strength, resilience, and community. They speak about racism before the war, losing family during the war, and the many struggles of fighting and living in the Guatemalan jungle for years at a time. They also share memories of the great successes and happy memories that have occurred in the years after the war, like owning their own land, creating families, and sharing their story with others.

For many Guatemalans, the civil war is ingrained in them as a part of their history, and they think of it as something that is essential to the history and development of their country. Many of the Guatemalans I interviewed spoke about the history of discrimination in Guatemala and what an important factor that was for Mayans fighting in the war. Sergio, a coffee farmer, ex-guerrilla, and community leader of a community of ex-guerrilla coffee farmers shared, “In the ‘60s, the political situation was very critical. The government was militarized so the atmosphere was really tense, it was ready to blow. There were two really important factors, which were racism and poverty. These were the most important triggers of the war.”

This discrimination was built up over hundreds of years and began with the Spanish conquest in the 16th century. Willy, a 44-year-old business owner and ex-guerrilla fighter, shared, “So this land was colonized by the Spaniards and then the British and then the Germans and then the Americans and then Canadians. Why is this? Because we have one of the richest soils on the planet...I don’t think we’re poor, we’ve been colonized. At the end, they put in your mind that you are a minority when actually we are the majority of the population. Asians and Africans and the people who live in Latin America, we are the majority.”

Discrimination was prevalent throughout Guatemalan communities and the Guatemalan government, and was so harsh and degrading that it affected all aspects of the lives of indigenous peoples. Sergio shared, “The people who conquered didn’t see the Mayans as people, they saw the Mayans as animals. The thought started that these Mayans weren’t people so they didn’t need to be treated like people...These racist practices devalue everything. Your size, your customs, your color, your language, your culture, your traditions. It devalues you to the point that it dehumanizes you. It’s not the same as talking about rich and poor, it’s a different scale.” As this quote makes clear, the Mayans in Guatemala were treated with little respect and were made to feel like they could not contribute anything to their country.

Seven Guatemalans that I spoke with fought with the rebels for indigenous rights to their language preferences and the right to own land and businesses. Therefore, many memories that indigenous Guatemalans have of life before the war are oppressive memories. Juana, a coffee farmer and ex-guerrilla fighter in her 60s, shared, “The people who were born during the ‘50s and ‘60s didn’t have any option but to go into the war because they wanted to fight against the social injustices of that time. There were lots of injustices started by the people who were in control of these fincas (farms), these big lands. People who were in charge of tiendas

(companies), too. These people exploited our people, and that's why we organized and started fighting." Willy also remembered social injustice and oppression. He explained, "Most of the people that were fighting in the war were already victims of the oppression of the government and the army. That's why people were escaping. Some people escaped as refugees and some others decided to defend the people, that is why they took to arms."

The oppression that is part of the collective memories from my interviewees were not limited to owning land and extended all the way to restricting languages that were spoken in Guatemala. Many indigenous Guatemalans that are still living do not know their native language because they could have been killed if they were caught speaking or learning it before and during the war. Guatemalans are still feeling the after-effects of this oppression today as well. As Sergio poignantly explained,

"Today, not talking is a way of hiding your identity. When you are a teacher and Mayan, you tell people that you are a teacher but you don't tell people that you're Mayan because you don't want to claim your origins. Nowadays, thousands of Guatemalans hide their identities. It's a complex phenomenon that still needs to be analyzed in order to understand why it happens and what we can do about it...I'm Mayan Mam (a Mayan language) but I cannot speak the language and I felt that it was my fault and I felt bad for not being able to speak mam. For years I felt bad about that because I felt that I had lost my culture, but as I became more educated and learned more I realized that it wasn't my fault. It was a result of institutionalized racism and I was a product of this system. I couldn't avoid it because it was how and when and where I was born."

These restrictions on individuals' native cultures was a major grievance of the rebel army and why many indigenous Guatemalans chose to fight against the government.

Based on the collective memories that were revealed in my interviews, another major contributor to the war was the inequality that was happening inside of the Guatemalan government. All of my interviewees spoke to how their government was taking their money and discriminating against Mayans instead of working to improve the country. Juana shares, "Some people were from the same social class as me but they were fighting for the enemy not at the

service of the town, or the service of the people. This happened because the government had brainwashed these people.” Anna shares why she went to war, “Because we didn’t have kids and because we realized the social injustices we were living, we decided to go to the war.” The rebel army of guerrilla fighters did not start fighting because they wanted a war; Guatemalans wanted a government that would represent the indigenous cultures and values and would help indigenous Mayans take back their place in businesses and government. Willy reflects, “95% of the time I spent in the war it was about studying and reading about history... We were not studying how to destroy the government. We were studying on how to build up a new society.” Interviewees reflected on the moment when the guerrilla army was formed and began to fight, and pinpointed the start of the war for the guerrillas to when the Guatemalan government, with the help of the U.S. government, labeled the indigenous people “communists,” declared war on them, and began to fight them.

Here, I analyze both memories of life before the war in order to understand why Guatemalans joined the guerrilla fighters as well as life during the war. Knowing why these individuals chose to join the guerrillas and fight against the Guatemalan government is important because the war was so dangerous. The Guatemalan military would kill anyone that they thought was associated with the guerrilla fighters, so understanding why the guerrillas decided to fight back and why individuals joined the guerrilla forces is necessary in order to understand what risk the guerrillas fighters took.

The memories that Guatemalans have of time during the war are blurry and centered around community and education. In order to be a fully functioning soldier in the rebel army, an individual had to go through seven years worth of training in the jungle. This training included education of Guatemalan and world history, skills training, and survival skills training.

The uniform and community-based training that all guerrilla fighters went through when they joined allowed the guerrilla army to create a common narrative for itself. All of its members were educated in the same way about Guatemala's history, the discrimination that led to the war, and the reasons that the guerrillas fighters were fighting. This common narrative could be considered a collective memory of its own, which would contribute to the very similar memories and reasons for fighting that are shared in my interviews.

When an individual first became a guerrilla fighter, they would have to read multiple books about world history and would have to go through intense training sessions with others that were new to the guerrilla fighters. Sergio shares his experience in the war, "I went to the war when I was 17 years old and came back from the war when I was 45. So I spent 28 years of life in the war, and of those 28 years, I spent 17 years in the jungle. It is kind of painful for me to remember this time because I lost so many friends. Obviously, talking about this conflict brings so many memories back to me of people who are not here anymore. So now, when I go to the middle of the jungle I am never lost but if you put me in the middle of the city I am constantly lost, I don't know where to go." This training helped individuals bond and educate themselves on what they were fighting for. The interviewees maintained that the guerrillas were not just fighting to be violent, they were fighting with a purpose and they made sure that everyone who was fighting with them believed in the cause as well. Willy shares, "There is this very inaccurate thinking of that guerrillas are always fighting. I don't even remember shooting the enemy because most of our job was working in coffee farms trying to make awareness to people of why we were struggling."

They also have memories of their parents sneaking food to the rebel army in the night when the Guatemalan army left their posts for the night, or kids lying to the army soldiers about

seeing the rebel army so they would not be taken away from their families. Throughout the interviews, interviewees had disturbing and scary memories as well as ones about community and strength.

Indigenous Guatemalans that did not fight in the war also have very scarring memories of time during the war. Many of these memories are of families sleeping on the floors of their houses because the Guatemalan government would come in the middle of the night and flatten houses with machine guns. I only interviewed 3 non-fighters, so I cannot speak to the experiences of those individuals as well but I do have some information from individuals who were not involved in the war as long or were not as directly involved in the fight as others. Maria, a coffee farmer and ex-guerrilla in her 50s, shared her experiences before she joined the war, “Our war was different in the sense that women and children were involved. The children had an important role because the war wasn’t only fighting but it also included things like relaying information. For example, this road here, the guerrillas would come by and ask if the army had come by and the kids would be the ones to say yes.” Memories of the Guatemalan War center around education and community and stress the importance of fighting for a cause. Knowing what cause individuals were fighting for and why people joined the guerrilla fighters is key to understanding how the collective memory of these people formed. The memories from the war also showcase how communities rallied around the guerrilla fighters to help them fight against the Guatemalan military. Even though it was a great risk to aid the rebel army, so many individuals and communities, even children, believed in their cause and helped however they could, which also speaks to the community that was present during the war.

Memories Create Community

Everyone who fought in the rebel army had a pseudonym throughout the entire war. Sergio reflects, “In the war, we didn’t use our real names, and we still go by those names sometimes because we got so used to them and sometimes it feels like those names are more real than our actual names. So a lot of people call each other by different names.” Because the Guatemalan army would kill anyone who was associated with the rebel army, the guerrilla fighters oftentimes changed their names and left without telling their family where they were going. Anna, a coffee farmer and ex-guerrilla in her 60s shared, “When my husband and I decided to leave for the war, I told my parents we were going to Mexico because if I told my parents that we were going to the war, the army could go to my parents and ask them about where my husband and I were. I didn’t want to endanger my parents so we lied to them.”

At the end of the war, many of the fighters sat down with one another and shared their real names, information about their families, and where they were from with other guerrilla fighters and community members. Sergio explained, “There’s also this thing where people had met each other in battle and then they got to meet each other when the war ended. And they met each other’s family and they were happy to create this community for everyone... We sat down after the war in San Marcos with people we met and fought with and told each our real names.” Sharing names and memories helped to create community amongst fellow guerrilla fighters, and the trust built between rebel fighters ended up helping entire communities rebuild and come together.

Oftentimes, sharing memories led to making more connections and potentially being reconnected with your family and friends. By sharing stories and a true identity, people were able to find out what had happened to those that they lost and find those who were still living somewhere in Guatemala. Many people wanted to know what happened to their loved ones that

lost their life, and wanted to say a proper goodbye. Guerrilla fighters helped family members of fallen soldiers find bodies and belongings in the jungle where the person was buried by his comrades. Maria reflects on finding her parents still alive, “When I came back I went to the same finca that I was working at before the war and I found out that my parents weren’t living there anymore, but I found someone who gave me the information of where my parents were living and I went and found them. I was happy, too because I didn’t think I would find them alive because the army was very present in that area.” Sergio shares, “A lot of times family reunions happened here in the first few years when we realized family members were still alive.” Guerrilla fighters who fought with an individual that passed usually shared stories of their bravery and dedication to their country with the individual’s family. In post-war Guatemala, memories reconnected families and brought closure to many people who were never going to see their loved one again.

Once people started sharing stories with one another about what they did before the war, communities began to form. Many guerrilla fighters and their families were farmers before the war so when they found out that other fighters were farmers as well, they were able to find and buy land together and create a community based on group farming. Sergio reflects, “Finally, we were like okay before the war we were working in the land, so why not do the same thing? Then we chose the project of land because this could offer us a stable house and stability in familiar terms. Not only having a job but being together and what not. After the war all we wanted was to settle altogether.” Because people were not allowed to reveal their identities in the war, many people found solace and healing in telling and listening to stories after the war. Sharing memories allowed communities to form and many times, in those communities, people were able

to support one another and go through major life changes together like learning how to farm, finding lost loved ones, and learning how to trust the government again.

Community Creates Change

When former guerrilla fighters created communities, often times it was for the purpose of creating a farming community with people that everyone could trust. Many indigenous Guatemalans still felt threatened after the war and did not feel safe giving up their weapons and hideouts in the jungle, so they formed communities so they could watch out for each other and be together if the government came after them again. Blanca, a coffee farmer in her 40s, shares, “My husband was a guerrilla fighter. His family came and asked him if he is happy with how he is living, and he told them that he is going to die fighting for what he believes in with the people that he trusts.” Maria sheds light on the post-war period and shares, “We didn’t think the army was serious about the peace accords and the end of the war. We were really scared the first few years after the war because we thought the government was going to come to kill us.” While one of the main reasons to start these communities was safety, the benefits of creating communities of ex-guerrilla fighters quickly piled higher and higher. Along with sharing culture and relearning Mayan history, creating community after the war gave many Guatemalans a chance to get involved in their country’s development socially and economically.

Getting involved in the fight for the economic change in Guatemala was important so the ex-guerrilla fighters could make a name for themselves in the country and so they would not have to depend on the government to make a livelihood. The distrust of the government’s peace treaty after the war was widely felt. Even more noticeable was the distrust of the government’s ability to strengthen and develop the country so that it could contribute to the world market. In

the early 2000s, the fair trade movement was sweeping across Central and South America. Many coffee farmers in Guatemala could not start to make a profit off of their coffee until they got a license to produce and sell fair trade coffee and products. However, fair trade licenses were hard to qualify for because the farmers had to use certain chemicals and growing techniques and the licenses costed a lot of money, so Guatemalans used their desire for development in their country and to help their community and decided to work together in order to get into the fair trade market. At one of the coffee farms we visited, I took field notes while hearing from farmers and workers about the process of getting a fair trade license and starting their coffee farm. They informed us that it took 13 years for the co-op they created with the fair trade license to get going. They started off with 7 farmers and now have 28 that use their license and grow their own coffee (Field notes, Antigua, July 2017).

Entrepreneurs in the same region of Guatemala started to work with activists from the United States and Europe to get the licenses they needed to begin production on goods ranging from coffee to woven tablecloths and clothing, which are two of the goods that Mayans have been producing for hundreds of years. The first fair trade coffee co-op we visited explained that an American social worker came across their coffee farm and offered to help them get a fair trade license (Field notes, Antigua, July 2017). This social worker lent them money to get started and helped them complete the paperwork and applications for grants in order to certify their co-op and buy the supplies and seeds needed to start growing coffee trees. A couple of different farms or stores would come together and purchase one shared license that allowed them to label their goods as fair trade and be considered a co-op. This meant that the different places get more of the profits they make on their products back, the continuing costs for the license are less because they split them among different groups, and they help communities throughout

Guatemala get into the world market of fair trade goods. Because many Mayans worked in fields before the war, they decided to use the skills they had and create companies that were centered on fair treatment of workers and economic development for their country. Guatemalans came together to create a future that was centered on equality, knowledge, and opportunity for all.

My interviews with Santa Anita coffee farmers, Antigua coffee farmers, and a Xela weaving company demonstrated how creative ways to develop a business can help develop a country by making use of natural resources and talent among Guatemalans. The coffee co-op that the farmers in Antigua and Colomba belonged to share their license with a lot of farms and allow more than 20 farmers to profit off of fair trade coffee production and sales. Many of these coffee farmers are Mayans who did not receive the education needed to work a job in a company in the city. Being able to work in the coffee fields and make a living that supports them and their families means more sustainable development within a family and a community. Juana shared, “There are still things that need to be done. Yeah, the fight in the mountains is over but we keep fighting in another way. We’ve got our family and the coffee now.” The same is happening within weaving co-ops in Guatemala. Weaving is a traditional skill learned among the rural women of Guatemala. Many women who live in rural places in Guatemala lost their fathers and husbands in the war, speak indigenous languages, have many children, and were not educated past elementary level so they cannot move to the city to get a well-paid job. One weaving co-op we visited is a great example of this business model. A representative for a weaving co-op that we heard from explained that their co-op gives jobs to over 400 indigenous women in 17 rural communities (Field notes, Xela, July 2017). These women each have different skill levels and different patterns that they are able to weave. A company will work with the representatives of the co-op to choose a design and create an “order” of some type for the women to weave. Work

is split up among the women who can weave that specific pattern and then is shipped to the customer. The representative informed us that they take care of all of the paperwork and communication with the customer because of the language barrier that is often in place. Each woman who helped weave a design gets paid based on how much she wove and the level of difficulty of the design, and all women are given enough designs every month in order to be paid a decent salary that they can support themselves and their families with. Being employed in a weaving co-op allows these indigenous Mayan women to practice their culture, stay in their homes and with their families, and make a living that supports their families.

This mindset of maintaining Mayan culture while also economically developing the country is slowly but surely changing Guatemala. Mary, a coffee farmer, community leader, and ex-guerrilla in her 60s, shared, “Now we are still fighting, but not with weapons. Now we fight for justice with coffee in this community.” Guatemalan fair trade coffee and weavings are now being sold throughout Europe and the United States. Local coffee shops in many different states are importing coffee from these co-op farmers because it is guaranteed to be great quality coffee. Many businesses in Europe are working with weaving co-ops in Guatemala to request designs that indigenous women will make for furniture and business products all across the world. Based on my field notes and interviews, the interests of these Guatemalans that are a part of these co-ops include having a creative and community-centered mindset and because they are taking the time to help their communities and their country, they are developing their country without the support of government funds or outside aid relief.

Education About The History of Discrimination

As Guatemalans work to rebuild their country economically, education has become equally important. As these communities engage in economic projects, they continually tell and retell the collective memory of the war and the factors that caused the war. Juana acknowledged, “The Spanish people thought we were dumb, we were silly people, we were not strong. But they were wrong because we got unified and even though we didn’t achieve everything we wanted to achieve, we still changed how society was back in that time.” Understanding that society in Guatemala has changed for the better, even though it is still not perfect, is key for understanding why these Guatemalans share their memories of the war with each other and visitors.

Many interviewees talked about how they are at a disadvantage today because they still do not have all of the information about their own culture and are still working to instill the Mayan culture and history into the Guatemalan history. The after-effects of this extreme and prolonged discrimination and oppression are still being felt by the Guatemalan people. Willy shared, “But then that’s part of the racism and oppression.” This discrimination against indigenous people was so prevalent in Guatemala and talking about it today allows those who lived it to educate those who did not experience it so it never happens again. Those who fought with the guerrilla fighters want people to understand how far they have come. They want people to understand that they fought for a better Guatemala so that their loved ones could live a better life. Maria shared, “And then I went to the war with my husband and it was not easy. Being in the guerrillas is not the same as being at home. For example, we would have our shoes all soaked and our clothes all soaked, it was not easy. But even though it was tough, we kept fighting... We were there because of our ideas. We thought that we had to be there...” These guerrillas fighters want people to understand that they have made progress, and that their efforts for equality in the war were not in vain. They also want people to understand that oppression was a major reason

that they were fighting in the war. Oppression and discrimination was so prevalent in Guatemala before the war so the fight for equality was a fight for a better future for indigenous Guatemalans.

Guatemalans that fought in the war with the rebel army also want people to understand that the fight is not over just because the weapons have been put down. Juana acknowledges the rights present today and shares,

“Now the fight still continues. Maybe before we needed more weapons and now we need more of something else. So women get organized and fight against sexism and protect against femicides. We still organize and fight. Now we have more freedom. We can get reunited. We can talk about things. We can go to the government and shout, ask for things. There are more rights now than before.”

Understanding how the past shaped the present and how the present has the power to change the future is crucial among these individuals. Just like they were fighting for a better life for their parents and siblings and children, they are now fighting for a better life for their children and their grandchildren. According to these individuals, education about the Guatemalan War is a key factor in changing the future.

Educating the country about what the guerrilla fighters were fighting for is crucial for the ex-guerrilla fighters and community members. Educating the younger members of society about what happened and what the after-effects of the war, like leftover discrimination and a lack of knowledge of the Mayan history and culture, is also crucial. Sergio shares, “Racism, what it does and what it searches for, is the destruction of groups of people. It destroys the historical memory of these peoples. It’s not just about power, it’s about division, and even though now we talk about how we’re at peace and how we’ve achieved peace, it’s still a division, a hidden crack in society. Wherever there’s policy that divides people, there can never be equality.” Educating people so policy in Guatemala can change is the next stepping stone. Ending racism and sexism go hand in hand as they both end in a better future for Guatemala. Willy encourages, “Engage in

what I call not equality, but the unity of diversity.” These guerrilla fighters continue to fight for what they were striving to achieve back in the ‘60s when the war started.

Even though the guerrillas technically lost the war because they did not gain power of the government, indigenous Guatemalans gained rights to practice and learn about their native cultures and were permitted to own land, which is a lot more than they were able to do before the war. Juana shares her experiences with educating community members about the reason that the guerrillas were fighting for equality, “At the beginning of the war we would go to different towns, or hamlets, and explain the different reasons that we were fighting. As the years passed by, we decided to record everything in little cassettes so we would put some talks on cassettes and then at the end of the meeting we would ask if anyone had any questions to the women and the people in the community.” After the war and their fight to educate Guatemala on the culture they should be able to be a part of ended, they were able to learn and speak their native language, celebrate Mayan culture, and connect with other Guatemalans that also wanted to learn about the culture and people that they were descended from. Sergio shares, “Even though we didn’t take the palace by arms, even though we did not win the war and take over the government, we won the right to talk about being Mayan and sit around the table and talk about our history today. Ideologically speaking, we won since we’re here talking about these things.” Because the guerrilla fighters had so much material on Guatemalan history and had spent so much time learning about Mayan culture in the war, they were able to educate community members about Guatemala’s history and how the war came about. Willy discusses, “The idea of this revolution was not to create communism and have statues of Lenin and Marx. The idea of this revolution was to produce and acquire all natural resources so we could make and bottle this or have a phone like this, so we could have our own resources.”

These individuals educate their community members so that there will not be another Guatemalan War and so that people can understand why it happened and why they are still fighting for their rights today. Sergio shares, “To wrap everything up, nobody is alone. We all belong. We all have roots, we all have history, we all have origins. So we all belong to somewhere. When we don’t know that, we become unhappy people, insecure and lonely. So it’s important to ask ourselves who we are and where we come from. When we don’t know how to answer this question, all these difficulties arise. It’s really important to stand out and say, ‘I am this person and I’ve got an army behind me.’ And, of course, the army is your history, your origin, your belonging.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In 1960, a group of indigenous Mayans believed that they deserved to own land and to be able to learn about their culture and speak their indigenous languages, so they decided to fight against the Spanish-run Guatemalan government and military. After 36 years of fighting and losing loved ones, they decided to end the war and sign peace accords so that the killing and fighting would stop. While they did not take over the government and overpower the military, they did walk away with the right to be Mayan and to learn about and practice Mayan culture, which was much more than they were able to do when the war began. Today, Guatemalans are trying to repair and develop their country and fight against new struggles like breaking into the world trade markets, educating the youth on Guatemalan history, and supporting each other in communities so they can stay strong together.

After the cultural trauma of the civil war, Guatemalans are improving their country through the creation of collective memories. While creating collective memory is important,

retelling the collective memory is crucial for people to benefit from the creation of a collective memory. Telling people about what led to the war, what happened during the war, and about the struggles right after the war allows individuals to inform others about their experiences, which educates the people who were not part of the war and begins the healing process for the individuals recalling the collective memory. Using collective memory to heal and educate others has allowed individuals to move on with their lives and focus on change that they are creating in the present. The core findings of my research showed that Guatemalans are working to improve their country through community, social, and economic change. After the war ended in 1996, many Guatemalans did not have a place to live and ended up settling into communities with their families and people they fought in the war with. During my interviews, the communities revealed themselves as crucial support systems for Guatemalans. These communities allowed people to build a life after the long-term violence and were oftentimes full of individuals that were ex-guerrilla fighters. Since the guerrilla fighters still believed that there was justice to be found for the indigenous people of Guatemala, these communities were often forces for change. They used their strength in numbers and support for one another to find ways that they could continue to make change in Guatemala even though the war was over.

This change is seen most through the economic pathways that Guatemalans have opened up for themselves. Communities came together to purchase land and start a coffee farm and production business. Other communities received help from foreign activists and began businesses that partner with foreign companies that need textiles or products that indigenous Guatemalans can make from scratch. These businesses are full of people that are motivated to create change in their country while also making a living for themselves. These business also allow Guatemalans to tell their story and spread the Mayan culture through their products, like

designs in products that are woven by rural indigenous women. Within Guatemala, these businesses are showing Guatemalans that they can be successful actors in the world market without help from the government. Spreading the word and educating Guatemalans about these business frameworks and the people who are a part of them is the main focus for activist communities today.

Education is an important part of healing for Guatemalans. Indigenous Guatemalans, Mayans, are just now learning about their history and culture. They are claiming historical sites and learning their native languages and traditions. In the process of learning, Guatemalans are also educating one another. Using the collective memories that were created during and after the war, they are educating younger generations on the causes of the war and the discrimination and oppression that led to the war, and educating themselves on world history and the histories of countries that have had similar histories so that they can learn how to heal and improve their country in a post-war environment.

My interviews and research in Guatemala showed that Guatemalans are trying to improve the future of their country so that the future of Guatemala looks nothing like its past. These individuals are creating communities of skilled farmers that are providing for themselves, traveling across the country and the world to learn about world history and about coffee and weaving opportunities, and digging up hundreds of years of Mayan history that they know hardly anything about. These individuals want to celebrate the fact that they won the privilege of being Mayan but they also want to recognize that the road ahead is a long one because of how long discrimination has been going on in Guatemala. Educating the country and removing the stereotype from being Mayan will be incredibly difficult to do because of how poorly Mayan culture was maintained, and how little Mayans of today know about their own history.

Experiencing a cultural trauma that was so long, impactful, and tense like the Guatemalan war brought these individuals together with their other community members and each other. Their experiences in the war have helped them find one another and find others that are dedicated to the same mission that they are. Communities come together and create change in Guatemala because these communities are all made up of individuals that want to make a difference in their country and continue the fight for equality and the fight for a better Guatemala.

The research and interviews that I conducted were in areas that were greatly affected by the war and had a high concentration of ex-guerrilla fighters or rebel army allies. Because of the makeup of the communities that I researched and because I only interviewed nine individuals, my research is not generalizable to all of Guatemala. I believe that the Guatemalan government, military, and elites of the country would have different experiences to share and recall the war in a different way than my interviewees recalled the war. Being the enemy of the rebel army, they may believe that the indigenous people brought on the violence or could have achieved justice in a different way than they did. In addition to the conflicting side of the war, I also believe that individuals that were not directly involved in the war would also have a different perspective of what happened. They may be resentful of both the rebel army and the Guatemalan military for inflicting such violent times on their country. My research was limited in interviewees and time so there are ways that it could have been stronger and included more perspectives.

My research could have been stronger if I had interviewed more individuals, individuals that had different experiences and roles within the war, and if I had been able to stay in the country longer. If I had more interviewees, my research may have been more generalizable or more representative of groups within Guatemala. If I had interviewed more individuals from

different backgrounds and who had different experiences in the war, I could have developed a better understanding of the “general” causes of the war present in collective memories and the after-effects of the conflict. I also could have gained a better understanding of what Guatemalans are doing today to improve their country after the war. If I had stayed in Guatemala, I believe that I would have been able to interview more individuals and build up stronger relationships with my interviewees, which may have led to more information in the interviews or more interviewees that trusted me and wanted to share their experiences with me.

Further research should examine conflicting opinions from the rebel army perspective. It would be beneficial to get the perspectives of individuals who fought with the Guatemalan military and individuals who were not a part of the war. During interviews with these individuals, it would be helpful to converse about what these individuals think is the best way for the country to heal and move forward with development and improvement. Overall, further research should be focused on learning the collective memory of the other groups that were different from the rebel army. This would allow for a greater understanding of whether collective memory is helping Guatemalans heal from the war and move towards a stronger, developed, and unified country.

This paper discusses the benefits of collective memory after a cultural trauma, and showcases how individuals and communities in Guatemala are using collective memory to impart knowledge on younger generations, heal from their violent past, and help their country. Creating a collective memory of the war has allowed individuals in Guatemala a chance to explain why they fought in the war and what the main purpose of the war was. It also allows them to bond with other individuals who have experienced similar circumstances and form communities so they can be around like-minded individuals. These communities are a force of

change in Guatemala and focus on changing Guatemala through education of younger generations, economic development, and support for indigenous Guatemalans who are just now having the chance to learn about their ancestry and discover a history of Guatemala that they have not known before.

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